

## Disability Awareness Month

### EDITORIAL PLACEMENT

Editors at local print and electronic media are always interested in a “good story.” So what makes a story idea attract an editor’s attention? For most editors, one or more of the following characteristics make a story newsworthy:

- **Information** – provides facts that readers/listeners/viewers don’t already know.
- **Timeliness** – relates to upcoming community events and allows time for people to take advantage of the information.
- **Significance** – will affect the lives of readers/listeners/viewers.
- **Scope** – impacts a majority of community members.
- **Interest** – attracts and holds attention, sometimes because of famous participants.
- **Uniqueness** – is unlike other information/event.
- **Human interest** – stirs empathy in readers/listeners/viewers.
- **Relevance** – enhances public understanding of a constant or pressing local issue.

When working with media, you will find that assignment editors – from print media, radio or television – are not all alike and will not all agree on what is “news.” Perseverance; a helpful, friendly attitude; and knowing when to say “thank you anyway” will be your greatest assets when dealing with the media.

Below are some step-by-step guidelines that will help you place editorial materials with your local media.

### **Story Ideas**

Try to generate story ideas. Remember, the story idea must fit the media format. For example, television requires a very “visual” story that will make for good film footage. A simple interview with an expert is often not enough. Children participating in a simulated blindness demonstration, however, would provide interesting visual material. Radio programs would welcome experts on controversial topics, such as “inclusion.” These experts make for interesting call-in shows. Daily newspapers favor stories with a universal human interest angle and a visual side for good photos. Weeklies are more likely to use black-and-white photos you provide. Other publications, such as newsletters for local organizations or companies, might have other requirements.

Special events, such as barrier awareness demonstrations, can provide good media opportunities, especially if a celebrity or political leader participates. You can also request on-the-air mentions from personalities such as weather people or popular radio personalities.

### **Media Contacts**

Call your local media and explain what organization you are with and that you are planning activities in conjunction with Disability Awareness Month. Ask to talk to the news director for radio or television, or the assignment editor of the newspaper. If you are interested in getting a story on a certain radio or television show or in a particular section of a print publication, such as business or lifestyle, ask who is in charge of that show or section. Present your idea confidently, without being pushy, and explain its value to the publication or station’s audience. If the editor/news director is interested, ask how much time he or she needs to develop the story, what types of story ideas are of interest to their publication or station and how you can best help them. At that point, you will probably be referred to a reporter. If the news person rejects one idea, mention some others. Ask if you can send your ideas in a letter. Be sure to get the correct spelling of the person’s name, his or her correct title and the current mailing address.

You should personalize the enclosed sample letter according to your discussion of story ideas. Include your organization’s name with some background information, a listing of local awareness activities, a contact person and phone number, and specific details about the story idea and arrangements for helping the story come about (i.e. times experts are available for

interviews, times when visually appealing events are taking place and sources for background information on the topic). A week or so after mailing the letter, you might want to place a follow-up call if you have not received a response.

### **Statewide News Release**

A copy of the Disability Awareness Month news release will be mailed statewide to daily and weekly newspapers in mid-February. When you talk to your local media representatives, mention the release. Ask if they received it and if they can use the material or would like you to provide names of local officials who could address disability topics. If they have not received the release, call Kim Dennison at (317) 631-6400 and she will promptly send another copy to them.

### **Calendar Listings**

A good way to get information to the public about a Disability Awareness Month event is through the calendar or upcoming events section of your local paper. Check your paper to see if it has this column. If so, call to get the contact's name. Once you have the appropriate contact person, send him or her written information, including what your event is, who is participating, and the time, date and place of your event. Note in the information that the event is open to the public and free of charge, if that is the case.

### **Interview Preparation**

Being prepared for an interview does a great deal to make the interview a success. You or your designated "expert" will provide a better interview if some time is taken beforehand to familiarize yourself with the subject matter. Knowing the subject matter well is the best line of defense. Generate a list of questions the reporter might ask and develop answers.

Another point to remember is to use full names (not nicknames) and specific times ("March 1" rather than "recently") and places. Give complete answers rather than a plain "yes" or "no." "Talk in headlines," getting main points across first. Know the name, address and phone number of an appropriate contact person(s) or organization(s).

For television interviews, look at the interviewer rather than the camera. Ask the producer in advance if he or she would like to use any appropriate visuals (slides, posters, photos, brochures, films or videotapes). Arrive at the studio on time. Dress comfortably and conservatively. Find a comfortable seated position that looks good.

While the above suggestions will help make a smooth and effective interview, the most important thing to remember is to RELAX!

### **Assist the Media**

Try to assist the media representative as much as possible. You will function as the liaison between the news person and the expert. Offer to provide sample questions, if the news person wants them. You should be able to provide directions to events and proper dates and times. Let the news person determine scheduling as often as possible. Though it might not be wise to press the person to follow through with your story idea, it is appropriate to ask when a story will be printed or aired so that you can clip a copy or have it recorded.

### **Follow Up**

Whenever you receive media coverage, follow up with a thank you letter. A sample is enclosed. Please use this as a guide and personalize your letter with appropriate information. The news person will appreciate the courtesy of a sincere “thanks.” It might be appropriate to have the executive director/chairperson of your organization sign the letter.

Sometimes a reporter with the best intentions inadvertently uses language in a story that creates negative impressions of people with disabilities. Examples include “the handicapped” or “the disabled person.” If you receive such media coverage, send a thank you letter, but also include suggestions and a set of guidelines for correct language when referring to people with disabilities. A sample letter is enclosed, along with “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities,” produced by the Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities.

(Sample Letter to Media Contacts)

(Date)

(Mr. John Doe)  
(Title)  
(XYZ Media)  
(123 Main Street)  
(Anytown, Indiana 46000)

Dear (Mr. Doe):

Thank you for talking with me about Disability Awareness Month and some of the activities the (Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities) is planning.

As we discussed over the phone, several opportunities exist during Disability Awareness Month for coverage of community awareness events, educational topics and disability-related issues. The disability community is one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, and it's important that people in our community are educated about this topic.

The (Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities) appreciates your willingness to help in this effort. I look forward to working with you on (producing this show/developing this story). If you have any questions, need further assistance or would like to schedule a special interview with (\_\_\_\_\_), please call me at (123-4567).

Sincerely,

(Your Name)  
(Title)

(Sample Thank You Letter)

(Date)

(Mr. John Doe)  
(Title)  
(XYZ Media)  
(123 Main Street)  
(Anytown, Indiana 46000)

Dear (Mr. Doe):

Thank you for increasing our community's awareness of Disability Awareness Month by (publishing the special story, "\_\_\_\_\_"; interviewing \_\_\_\_\_ on "show"; etc.).

Your story reminded our community that people with disabilities are people first and are contributing members of society. It is important to eliminate the physical and attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities. Through informative stories like yours, our community will better understand this need.

The (Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities) appreciates your support, and we would be happy to serve as a source of information for any future articles that relate to people with disabilities.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)  
(Title)

(Sample Thank You Letter – With Suggestions for Appropriate Language)

(Date)

(Mr. John Doe)

(Title)

(XYZ Media)

(123 Main Street)

(Anytown, Indiana 46000)

Dear (Mr. Doe):

Thank you for your recent article/broadcast about our organization/event. Although we always appreciate coverage about people with disabilities and the issues that concern them, it is also important to realize that the way a reporter tells a story can make a significant difference in how people with disabilities are perceived in the community.

Reporting on the disability community is just like reporting on any other minority group; there are “correct” words and phrases to use. The Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities and other disability organizations emphasize “people first” language that focuses on the person first, with the disability as secondary. For example, *woman who is deaf* is preferred over *deaf woman*. In addition, *people with disabilities* is preferred over *the handicapped* or *the disabled*.

I have enclosed “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities.” The guidelines explain preferred terminology when reporting about people with disabilities and reflect the input of more than 100 national disability organizations.

If you ever have a question these guidelines don’t address, please feel free to contact me. Again, we appreciate your coverage of our organization and people with disabilities in general.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)

(Title)

enclosure

## **Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities**

When writing, it's important to be concise, particularly in journalism. However, sometimes the effort to limit wordiness leads to inappropriate references to people with disabilities. The following guidelines explain preferred terminology and reflect input from more than 100 national disability organizations. These guidelines have been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country. Although opinions may differ on some terms, the guidelines represent the current consensus among disability organizations. Portions of the guidelines have been adopted into the "Associated Press Stylebook," a basic reference for professional journalists.

**DO NOT FOCUS ON DISABILITY** unless it is crucial to a story. Avoid tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injury. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for those individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

**PUT PEOPLE FIRST**, not their disability. Say "woman with arthritis," "children who are deaf" or "people with disabilities." This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation. Despite editorial pressures to be succinct, it is never acceptable to use "crippled," "deformed," "suffers from," "victim of," "the retarded," "the deaf and dumb," etc.

**DO NOT SENSATIONALIZE A DISABILITY** by writing "afflicted with," "crippled with," "suffers from," "victim of" and so on. Instead, write "person who has multiple sclerosis" or "man who had polio."

**DO NOT USE GENERIC LABELS** for disability groups, such as "the retarded" or "the deaf." Emphasize people, not labels. Say "people with mental retardation" or "people who are deaf."

**EMPHASIZE ABILITIES**, not limitations. For example:

- Correct: "uses a wheelchair/braces" or "walks with crutches"
- Incorrect: "confined to a wheelchair," "wheelchair-bound" or "crippled"

Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors such as "unfortunate," "pitiful" and similar phrases.

Disability groups also strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities. Terms such as "handi-capable," "mentally different," "physically inconvenienced" and "physically challenged" are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with directly and candidly.

**SHOW PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS ACTIVE** participants in society. Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with people without disabilities in social and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communications.



**DO NOT PORTRAY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS SUPERHUMAN.** Many people with disabilities do not want to be “hero-ized.” Like many people without disabilities, they wish to be fully included in our communities and do not want to be judged based on unreasonable expectations.

**DO NOT IMPLY DISEASE** when discussing disabilities that result from a prior disease episode. People who had polio and experienced after-effects have a post-polio disability. They are not currently experiencing the disease. Do not imply disease with people whose disability has resulted from anatomical or physiological damage (e.g., person with spina bifida or cerebral palsy). Reference to the disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, such as arthritis, Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis. People with disabilities should never be referred to as “patients” or “cases” unless their relationship with their doctor is under discussion.

**LISTED BELOW ARE PREFERRED WORDS THAT REFLECT A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IN PORTRAYING DISABILITIES:**

- *Brain injury.* Describes a condition where there is long-term or temporary disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional or social functioning may occur. Use “person with a brain injury,” “woman who has sustained brain injury” or “boy with an acquired brain injury.”
- *Cleft lip.* Describes a specific congenital disability involving lip and gum. The term “hare lip” is anatomically incorrect and stigmatizing. Use “person who has a cleft lip” or “a cleft palate.”
- *Deaf.* Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech though the ear. “Hearing impaired” and “hearing loss” are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss – from mild to profound. These terms include people who are hard of hearing and deaf. However, some individuals completely disfavor the term “hearing impaired.” Others prefer to use “deaf” or “hard of hearing.” “Hard of hearing” refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Use “woman who is deaf,” “boy who is hard of hearing,” “individuals with hearing losses” and “people who are deaf or hard of hearing.”
- *Disability.* General term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability to, for example, walk, lift, hear or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory or mental condition. Use as a descriptive noun or adjective, such as “person living with AIDS,” “woman who is blind” or “man with a disability.” “Impairment” refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism, which may result in a disability.
- *Disfigurement.* Refers to physical changes caused by burn, trauma, disease or congenital problems.

- *Down syndrome*. Describes a chromosome disorder that usually causes a delay in physical, intellectual and language development. Usually results in mental retardation. “Mongol” or “mongoloid” are unacceptable.
- *Handicap*. Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment or by one’s self. Some individuals prefer “inaccessible” or “not accessible” to describe social and environmental barriers. “Handicap” can be used when citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. Do not refer to people with disabilities as “the handicapped” or “handicapped people.” Say “the building is not accessible for a wheelchair-user.” “The stairs are a handicap for her.”
- *HIV/AIDS*. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body’s immune system to ward off infections. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A positive test for HIV can occur without symptoms of the illnesses, which usually develop up to 10 years later, including tuberculosis, recurring pneumonia, cancer, recurrent vaginal yeast infections, intestinal ailments, chronic weakness and fever and profound weight loss. Preferred: “people living with HIV,” “people with AIDS” or “living with AIDS.”
- *Mental disability*. The Federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability: “psychiatric disability,” “retardation,” “learning disability” or “cognitive impairment” is acceptable.
- *Nondisabled*. Appropriate term for people without disabilities. “Normal,” “able-bodied,” “healthy” or “whole” are inappropriate.
- *Seizure*. Describes an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc., resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy or from an acquired brain injury. Rather than “epileptic,” say “girl with epilepsy” or “boy with a seizure disorder.” The term “convulsion” should be used only for seizures involving contraction of the entire body.
- *Spastic*. Describes a muscle with sudden abnormal and involuntary spasm. Not appropriate for describing someone with cerebral palsy or a neurological disorder. Muscles, not people, are spastic.
- *Stroke*. Caused by interruption of blood to brain. Hemiplegia (paralysis on one side) may result. “Stroke survivor” is preferred over “stroke victim.”

The Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities would like to acknowledge the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas for the usage rights of the “Guidelines.”

## **PLANNING TIME FACT SHEET**

This fact sheet should help you develop a good relationship with local media representatives so you can encourage coverage of Awareness Month activities. Media outlets are not all the same. When you contact the media depends on what type of coverage is desired. Keep in mind the media's varying deadlines. Following are some rules of thumb about media deadlines:

### **Radio and Television Public Service Announcements**

Most stations prefer to have PSA scripts from four to six weeks in advance of planned air dates.

### **Radio and Television Event Coverage**

Mail media advisories one to two weeks prior to your event. Follow up by phone a day or two before the event.

### **Daily Publications**

If you are planning an event and want people to attend, mail the release at least two or three weeks in advance. For calendar sections, verify the deadlines, because they are often different than normal deadlines. If you want to generate coverage of a special event, mail a release at least a week in advance and follow up by phone a day or two before the event.

### **Weekly Publications**

Deadlines at weekly papers are generally about a week before publication, so mail releases at least two weeks in advance.

### **Magazines**

Magazines work two to three months in advance. Therefore, you might not be able to place announcements of your event. However, you can contact magazine editors to encourage coverage of your Awareness Month activities or to encourage them to interview experts or persons with disabilities.